Irradiation Could Halt Food Contamination

By ACSH Staff — July 3, 2007

[1] **New York, NY** -- July 9, 2007. Multiple recent cases of bacterial contamination of the food supply make it imperative that all effective means of sanitizing both animal and plant products be used, including the use of food irradiation. Physicians and scientists associated with the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) emphatically endorse the use of irradiation, to enhance safety and complement other food protection methods, in an updated booklet posted on the ACSH website.

The latest (sixth) edition of *Irradiated Foods* [1] , updated by Paisan Loaharanu, M.S. (former Head of the Food and Environmental Protection Section of the Joint Division of Nuclear Techniques in Food and Agriculture of the FAO and IAEA) explains the process of food irradiation as well as its benefits. Not only does irradiation enhance food safety, it can also increase the availability of numerous foods rarely if ever before sold in the U.S. market.

"It is important that consumers understand that food irradiation is a safe process," states Dr. Ruth Kava, director of nutrition at ACSH. "Irradiation does not make food radioactive any more than a dental X-ray makes teeth radioactive." She adds, "Irradiation is meant to supplement -- not replace -- other methods of ensuring food safety. Thus, consumers must continue to handle and store foods properly."

Irradiation can be used on foods for a number of purposes. Typically, a low dose of radiation can be used to pasteurize foods such as meat, poultry, seafood, and spices in the same manner that heat is used to pasteurize milk, eliminating disease-causing organisms. Recent research has shown that leafy produce such as spinach and lettuce can also be sanitized by irradiation without impairing its quality.

To avoid importing destructive insect and other pests with foreign produce, the foods must be treated to kill or inactivate them. Standard processes include temperature treatments that may impair quality, or fumigation with toxic gases. But irradiation can avoid these techniques -- it can both halt the spread of pests and in some cases improve food quality without impairing safety. Thus, irradiation will allow Americans greater access to a variety of produce not currently available, and will also allow American producers to sell their products in countries with strict food quarantine laws.

The safety of food irradiation has been studied more extensively than that of any other food preservation process, including canning, freezing, dehydration, and the use of chemical additives. Just as processing foods by other means (such as broiling) can create minute amounts of new chemicals, so can irradiation -- but there is no evidence that trace amounts of these chemicals are hazardous for human consumption. Nor does irradiation of food pose a risk to workers in

irradiation plants or to communities in which irradiation plants are located.

Over 50 countries have approved irradiation for various applications, as have The World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the American Medical Association, the American Dietetic Association, and the Institute of Food Technologists.

According to ACSH President Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, "Food irradiation is a most valuable addition to our arsenal in the war against food-borne illnesses. The American consumer has much to gain and nothing to lose from the wider application of food irradiation to our food supply." Consumers can learn more about irradiation in the latest edition of ACSH's *Irradiated Foods* [1] .

Contact: Dr. Ruth Kava, ACSH Director of Nutrition: 212-362-7044 x234 (kava@acsh.org [2])

The American Council on Science and Health is an independent, non-profit consumer education organization concerned with issues related to food, nutrition, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, lifestyle, the environment and health. For more information visit http://www.acsh.org [3] or http://HealthFactsandFears.com [4]
